

The Detroit Free Press

Sunday, November 26, 1933

Honor Among Women

BY GEORGE GIBBS



IT was no wonder when the crash came that people stared at one another, and when the amazement was over, turned against God for taking an unfair advantage of their credulity.

But the calamity seemed to make little difference—mental, moral, physical—for the damage had been done. Habits had been formed. The belief that the orgy of recklessness would go on forever had changed to a blind determination to carry on and go to the devil hitting on all eight cylinders.

Whitney Fonteney, called Pinky because of the color of the reddish blonde tansure around his bald spot, was one of these irresponsible youngish persons spurred by the recklessness of the times and contributing to the gaiety and amusement of a certain number of people who had nothing better to do than run from one party to another, beginning with tea (so called) at Pinky's at six and ending in Harlem or somewhere else in the early hours of the morning. Nobody knew where Pinky got his money. Of course he did a lot of high-class bootlegging—for bootlegging had become a highly esteemed occupation chosen by members of the most distinguished families.

Perhaps the crowd was known as Pinky's circle because Pinky provided most of the liquor it consumed; but it might just as well have been called Margot Stribling's circle, because in spite of the enormity of her youth, Margot had more brains than any of them and a talent for leadership that was not to be denied. Graham Gilson, called GaGa for short, might have had claims to leadership, through his faculty for holding all that was brought to him without becoming in the least intoxicated, thus exciting the constant admiration of all concerned.

There were others not so difficult to fill as Fonteney and Gilson. Joe Naylor had a huge studio furnished elaborately with nothing at all except an easel, a refrigerator, a talking machine and a kitchen table with a zinc top, leaving the vast floor quite vacant. The walls were unspeakable with Joe's Modernist efforts.

Pinky's studio apartment was quite unlike Joe's, with a real piano, chairs, tables and other useful things, including some good rugs and honest-to-God Spanish tapestries hanging over the railing of the gallery. Pinky did not paint; he did not have to paint with a studio like that.

It was the hour of the afternoon which in Pinky's set comes between the hour of having nothing to do but drink a highball and the hour of having nothing to do but drink a cocktail. In other words, it was almost time to be putting aside

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A COMPLETE NOVEL

the windows and a car at the curb. "Gosh," she said, "Allen has forgotten to lock the door. Good night, Bruno. I can get in safely now."

Another touch of fingers and he was in the street toward Fifth Avenue.

She stood watching until he waved his hand at the turn of the corner, then she slipped inside the vestibule of the house.

"There was a man standing in the hallway, a stranger," she thought. "He was a very whitey, but he should be."

"Is this Miss Strikling?" he asked.

"Yes, what is it, Mother?"

"Allen has come forward from the door. He is very whitey, she was aware of strange things, but she thought that Allen's face was even whiter than she should be."

"What is it, Allen? Is something wrong? Who are these people?"

"Oh, Miss—, something has happened. We have been trying to reach you all day."

"What is it, Mother?"

"No. Your father—in his office, Miss—there was an accident. He—be is dead."

Her head whirled and somebody handed her a chair.

"Mother—"

"This is upstairs, Miss. She has just arrived here from Boston. She—Margot understood. A woman had come from an inner room and was talking to her. It was her cousin Helen.

"Oh, thought I might be of some help. We've been phoning all day yesterday. Where have you been, Miss?"

"An—out of town, Margot stammered in a daze. Cousin Helen would have liked to know she had never approved of Margot.

"It has been so terrible for us all. You will have to be brave. Strikling is a very whitey, she was aware of strange things, but she thought that Allen's face was even whiter than she should be."

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blood. My great-grandfather was a moneylender in Russia. He was killed in a pogrom. My grandfather escaped. He sold newspapers and hairpins on the street. But he established a great dry-goods business in New York, my father said, you know—"The Emporium," Margot Strikling sighed.

"No wonder you know how to look out for yourself! You could be in the stock tomorrow and make your way in the world."

"Interior decorating," said Amy contemptuously.

"Anything. As for me, I'm afraid of nothing. What else I do?"

"Is it really going to be as bad as that?"

"You afraid so, Mr. Fernald does not know yet."

"Oh, Margot, I'm terribly sorry."

"I don't know. Of course it's in the papers. I phoned him last night, but at his hotel. I tried again this morning, but he had left for Washington."

"There are lots of other good men in the world. Amy said. She thought would marry you in a minute if you could stand his rotten politics."

"Don't, Amy. Please." Margot had caught her again by the hand and held it tightly. The better Amy in the eyes and then relaxing, turned away and rose.

"Any rose and put her arm lightly around Margot's shoulder. "It isn't the way you feel about it, darling."

"Of course Bruno was telling him the more facts of the disaster. It was not until he returned from the funeral of her father that she found a letter from Bruno awaiting her. It was a very beautiful letter written in Italian, expressing his great sorrow at the misfortune that had overtaken her. He regretted that he had not been able to come to New York for the funeral because a matter of world-wide importance had demanded his presence in Washington. He hoped that he would be able to come to New York the following week. His love for her of course was unchanged, or if changed at all was to a deeper tenderness for her to the time of her affliction.

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Harvey, Jr., had been brought up from Lawrenceville for the funeral, and the funeral committee was headed by the Walter Striklings, Aunt Sophy and Cousin Helen, whose fortunes had also been impoverished.

Mr. FERNALD had not been speaking more than a few sentences when Margot was aware that the affairs of the bank and of the family were as bad as it could be. She had thought them.

Money had never been anything to Margot but something to spend and to give. The idea of a relation to any such plan, based on the generous proposition that people were poor and that money was meant to be and that others were rich for the same reason, she thought that a thing could occur when there would be no need to consider to her for the time she gave at the window at the bank had never entered her mind.

When Mr. Fernald had said that the families of Strikling & Co. were short five and a half millions of dollars and that the assets were inconsiderable—stocks whose value had sunk almost to the vanishing point, Margot began to have a realization of the exact meaning of the disaster to them and to Cousin Helen and Aunt Sophy and the Walter Striklings and to her. But there had never meant but there was no money left for Harvey Strikling's family. The house and its furniture were mortgaged to the full limit in pre-war times and the mortgage interest, ever since the Striklings had been hypothesized in the attempt to cover marginal accounts in brokerage houses.

Margot had some difficulty in believing the news. She was not such a reality, but she managed to believe it. She was not the family a companion which did her credit. Mrs. Walter Strikling and Aunt Sophy, on the contrary, took little pains to hide their opinions in the matter and the funeral over and over again Strikling six feet under ground, expressed themselves without trouble to spare. Margot Strikling's feelings.

"A disastrous failure even in three like these," Aunt Strikling said.

"The loss was bitter, the accident unaccountably untimely. But Margot held her peace.

"I'm sorry for your sake, Cousin Amy," she said quietly. "That's all I can say."

"There was quite a number of trouble," the members of your own family, Cousin Amy, who was over 60, with her little mouth of a scolding bird. "I want to have money better after using the way you've all been doing for years with houses and boats and automobiles."

"I'm sure, Aunt Sophy," Margot began in reply. "That made a great deal of money for you at one time or another. He had no money when you were a girl. But making money for me is all I'm going to do. I want to have money better after using the way you've all been doing for years with houses and boats and automobiles."

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not believe all the vile things he said about her. Her very self, the sight of these things was bound to do something even more vital than this—the recognition of the fact that Cousin Walter had found at last some kind of real happiness away from his wife. Who had told the woman of Cousin Walter's attentions to her? Aunt Adeline? Or Margaret's mother? Or course she heard about Bruno's attentions; and Lucy she remembered had been rather keen (from a distance) about him herself.

Margot closed the window, took up her Christmas presents, then went to her office to relieve her aunt, but and some other articles that belonged to her, gave the night watchman a Christmas greeting (all the others had gone home) and went out into the street. She walked feebly across to the lighted street to the right of the life, commotion and the Christmas spirit.

Christmas! Since her misadventure she had tried to be philosophical, but a temptation to recall the same day and hour of the past year was overwhelming. At Pastor's, then a Christmas tree at Joe's studio where one of the models had danced and everybody had gotten rather tipsy.

That was even before Bruno had appeared—before her father had died and Strikling and Company had failed. * * * It was strange that life should be like that—that so many intimately horrible things could happen with such a casual air. That was the dreadful part of it all, the cruel, indifferent way that life went on and would go on—*even her own, no matter what happened.*

And now she realized that for so apparent reason life had again deprived her right to exist as she planned, even though she did no harm to anyone. That Margot realized that, no matter what happened in the interview between Cousin Walter and his wife, she had left the office for the last time. Poor Cousin Walter, so quiet and so efficient with his eyes fixed but so futile against his wife! Well, that was that, as she had said before. There were other jobs, of course. There was always the glove counter at The Emporium. But perhaps Amy wouldn't help her now . . .

LUCY STRIKLING and her mother, whatever their differences in character or temperament, had one trait in common—the desire to get on in the world.

It was this wish to improve her condition that had induced Anne McElhanna, the leader of the young or social set in Mackinaw, to invite her to marry a millionaire, a big business man of New York whom she had met one summer at Atlantic City; for he belonged, she knew, to a wealthy and influential family who might bring her into the place in the world to which she believed she was entitled. And Lucy, she a good red rosy, had been so certain that she had secured it on toward the goal. That it was that Lucy—no matter what her fancy for the good looking, imperious sailors whom she preferred to encourage the attentions of the drunken Delaney boy because of his millions. But she had kept a weather eye to windward too when George Pincant came from Lane to the office and in the office and, once or twice at dances this season, had paid her some attention. Of course she knew that George Pincant was a very serious young man, little addicted to girls and quite different from "Ipec" Delaney, who liked to live up on his legs and was known to have loved her more when he was slightly "joggled."

Both Lucy and her mother were



"So that's the kind you are," he said, cold and

aware that George Pincant had cared for Margot for a long while and she had always been a natural discoverer in the way of any matrimonial ambition in that direction; but his friendship for Lucy and Margot's complete disappearance from the social scene had given Anne Strikling the hope that the drunken Delaney boy and his millions might not be necessary to them after all if George Pincant could be brought more closely into contact with her straitened daughter. To this end he had been invited to dine and to the theater with the younger married couple of Lucy's acquaintance.

George Pincant did not discuss Margot with her cousins because Margot, after he saw her visit downtown, had asked him not to speak of her employment in Walter Strikling's office. He had thought this strange, but he had obeyed her orders. There was an unpleasantness in the family which he did not understand. But he liked Mrs. Strikling and Lucy and his visits to the apartment consisted through the winter. Anne Strikling had discovered that George had always been an idealist when women were concerned, that his affection for Margot was deeply rooted in the memories of his boyhood, and had grown the way the twig had been shaped.

After discovering Margot and her husband in what she considered to be a too friendly attitude in his private office, she became quite un-

scrupulous, deciding if possible to destroy George Pincant's faith in such a creature, to undermine, by any means in her power, the affection which stood as a barrier to her plans for Lucy. Her reason for her hatred had grown, too, in the recollection of Walter Strikling's wild life futile efforts in defense of Margot and himself. How far he had gone with the girl she did not know or care.

"Of course Margot couldn't understand you, George," she said maliciously. "She is a sweet girl but with such a terribly unpractical bringing up." This was the sort of thought she said with him, a compliment and a slap for Margot with always an underlying note of praise for George.

And then, a little later when she was sure that she had completely gained his confidence: "The always admired Margot's independence," she said cautiously, "but she ought really to have had some one to advise her." Lucy would have been very wild if I hadn't talked to her sensibly about things. But Margot's mother was not the sort to be sensible; you know how she is, of course. * * * very amiable, very faithful. * * * So Margot went her own way, really with that terrible crowd at Whitney Postle, that deplorable artist—whose his name. * * *

"Napier."

And that Rosovsky girl whose father went that cheap department store uptown, The Em-

porium, that dreadful actress person, Lily Hohen, and Graham Gilson—good enough family but haven't drawn a cent break in years. That was hardly the crowd for a girl of Margot's blood veins of life."

"Give your rights. I am a bit staid, you see."

"Yes—ridiculous! Really, George! Anne Strikling drew back, her eyes narrowed so though to examine him better and then laughed in partly derision.

"Perhaps, George, you're only staid by comparison with Margot. Of course, she has worried her mother almost to death with her friendship for strange people, her—(ah! I say?)—associations with dissipated men. I know of George. Mrs. Strikling passed off effectively as though her restraint was even more charitable than necessary, 'that what's the use of it?' That sort of thing passed for femininity when she was rich and that very powerful, but since she has lost all her money, she has been practically ostracized by her family."

"Really? I can't understand that, Mrs. Strikling," he said, sure of his right now to betray Margot's secret in her defense, "what your own husband took her into his office—Anne Strikling had not expected the center-thrust, but she was prepared for it. "I suppose I've got to tell you, George, though it is one of the most unfortunate incidents in my

married life. My husband and I have lived together for over 20 years in perfect accord, without a word of disagreement about anything. Until just before Christmas we were had a misunderstanding. And then—"

She paused again with obvious pain. "Then one day I found out that Margot Strikling was at the office and that things were not as they should have been. I went down there and—and surprised them in a—well—a most intimate relationship." Another moment of painful hesitation and then: "We think you are too free to go on deceiving yourself any longer about Margot. Why should he be running down a member of my husband's own family if I did not think it necessary for your own good? Margot is not worthy of you—is not worthy of the love of any good man."

George Pincant had risen and taken up his hat. He could not stay any longer involving Margot being reviled. Even if what Anne Strikling had told him was the truth he would much have preferred not hearing it. He remembered, too, several things that he had not been able to understand. Why had there been any necessity for Margot to be in her being in Walter Strikling's office unless Anne Strikling had told the truth? His faith in Margot in spite of the gossip he had heard about her and his faith in her was running out of him. Poor George Pincant, seemed to parting discomfiture of this sort himself, could not conceive of any one practicing it upon him for any purpose whatever.

Anne Strikling watched him go out. Even if it was difficult for him to believe everything that she had told him, she knew that she had achieved her purpose for the present.

MARGOT never learned exactly what had happened at the Strikling's apartment upturn after the visitation of Anne Strikling at the office on Christmas Eve. She was sure, in spite of Walter Strikling's subsequent visits to the Village, that she had made no mistake in giving up her position. He gave evidence on his last visit of having been completely vanquished by his family and so Margot asked him not to come to the Village to see her any more.

Anne Strikling had had the last word and Margot had relinquished her only chance of telling her exactly what she thought of her. The remark that she had made that she was of Cordia Walter was the job. It was curious how badly things had been going with her ever since she had tried to become of some use to the family.

And now, what? Her alternative seemed to be two—the glove counter at The Emporium or marrying Joe. She had given up all thought of George Pincant since then. She had met by chance while she was walking in the Square two weeks ago. She had asked him if he couldn't find her a job in his office but he had given her little encouragement. Something funny had happened to George. His eyes were more honest than his mouth. He was, however, but they were benign differently. The kindness that shone in them was the kindness of pity. He thought it would be very painful for her to be in his office but whether painful for Margot or for him he did not say. He folded with his gloves and otherwise did not say a word.

There were reasons why she did not care to speak to Amy about a job at The Emporium, for Amy and Mrs. Strikling were so definitely connected to be married.

It would be very unpleasant to be relegated to the glove-counter at The Emporium where Mr. Klemm might so be begun following the ad-

prayer they made to walk a knife's width of rock, with scriptures on either side before we could descend to the bottom of the Chertons. One of my company, a young lad from the farm to the south, now terrified, screamed and fell, his body heaving from shoulder to shoulder until it landed in the forest far below. That was the end of the order of the Chertons.

"Now, Margot," Margot said. "Strange things happened that night. I fell into the sea, and escaped death by accident, for which there seemed no reason of explanation. In my excitement, as the Australian banded two boys and me, with the same girl of his name. They went out one night on a sort of duty along a ridge of the mountains. Besides of that, I came back. Their bodies, horribly broken, were found not 20 feet apart at the foot of the peninsula under the Australian lines. Nobody knows that happened. Nobody cares. The mountains tell no tales." He said, with another laugh. "You Australian, Margot, so I am sitting here the slightest touch of your feet might send me into eternity."

"Irene!" the spring in her feet as she ran by the others trying to drag him to a safer place. Eric had risen, but, and stared in dull amazement.

"Don't be a damn fool, Bruno!" he said and took Margot's arm leading her toward the safe cliff at the rock up which they had climbed.

But Bruno caught her by the other arm.

"No, not yet, Margot. Don't go yet. I want to say something to you first."

"What is it?"

"Bruno had been drinking from his flask from time to time on the water. But I thought it might be better to be on the safe side and he had been drinking from the flask. But Bruno, stopping abruptly, looked with his body the narrow entrance to the descent.

"I DON'T mind being called a damn fool by Eric," Bruno laughed. "Because, you see, being called a damn fool is no insult at all. It is rather a compliment."

"You're like if you listen to me for a moment," Bruno said softly. "I'm just trying to be friendly, just as I can't be friendly if you won't listen to me, now can I?"

From her silence Margot struggled desperately into words—the only words that had the power to silence him.

"Bruno, you've got to know. I—I'm engaged—to be married to Eric Rowley."

"Yes, I love him. You don't matter any more. I'm going to marry him—soon. I hope that's clear enough for you to understand—"

"It was never very clear," he said slowly.

"Then leave me alone," she cried wildly. "You leave us both alone. I tell you. . . . There is something between you and me. . . . I have tried to show you, but you did not want to be shown. . . . I tell you nothing. . . . You forfeited all right to consideration long ago. . . . You are out of my life, so away! . . ."

Never let this conversation be repeated now or at any other time."

She shouting the eloquent phrases at him like bullets from a gun but he stood obstinately in her path.

"That don't you say what I want to say if you persist in this cruelty that what passed between us is nothing to you."

He was grinning again as he had done a while ago when he almost challenged Margot to push him over the ledge.

Margot's body was very still and her face was the color of the moonlight. Eric put her arm, through his and held her hand, but both head and arm were leaden weights.

"Well, if you've got anything to say," Eric said sharply, "say it quickly. It's time Margot was getting to bed."

"Well, as this," Bruno replied. "I've known about this for some

time and I'm giving her up to you, Eric. Make as I love her I'm giving her up to you. Do you understand?"

Eric made a threatening gesture. "Get out of my way or I'll throw you out."

"Wait, wait a moment, Eric," Margot's voice, picked her, made an effective barrier between them.

"You've got to know, Eric."

"Poor brother, Margot—I—"

"Yes, I must—you've got to know. Bruno and I were—"

Eric frowned. "Well—suppose you were. There's nothing in your being engaged to make such a fuss about."

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"Oh, is that really true, Eric? I am—"

Margot released herself from Eric's arm.

"There must be no quarrel, Eric," she said. "I can't have that."

Bruno laughed again as he went on. "I want you to be as much as I like while you are in my power. Just a little more than that, so that you can't have any more."

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